

The Story of English

ALMOST 100 years ago, the American poet Walt Whitman, reflecting on the special qualities of the English language, decided that it was, above all things, democratic – the language of the many rather than the few.

It was, he wrote, “not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes of long generations of humanity, and has its basis broad and low, close to the ground.”

The Story of English takes Whitman’s observation as a kind of epigraph. In a way that will probably have linguistic conservatives (for whom a split infinitive can seem like the end of civilisation as we know it) reaching for the textbooks, we have found that much of our most colourful and expressive English originates in “slang” or “argot” or “jargon”.

In other words, English is made and re-made not just by writers and scholars, but by all of us who use it – some two billion according to the highest estimates, a staggering two-fifths of mankind.

So, if there is a philosophy to the series it is to say that the English language is not just the property of the English themselves, but of the many English-speaking communities around the world, whose own varieties continue to enrich the language in surprising ways.

Even with all the resources of global communications, the extraordinary range of English today is perhaps not noticed enough. Indeed, it often seems that, in the words of author Salman Rushdie, “the Empire is striking back”. In Australia, New Zealand, India, the Caribbean and anglophone Africa there are new English literatures that are invigorating the native English tradition.

Indeed, the idea for *The Story of English* came from a sense of mild exasperation at the inaccessibility of much of the writing about the history of the language. I felt that there was a richly entertaining story to be told that could, so to speak, be taken out of the library and brought into the mainstream of popular interest.

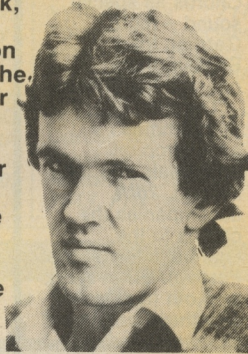
Writing, filming and recording the television series *The Story of English* entailed an enormous amount of travelling throughout the English-speaking world, especially in locating the subjects for interview, the voices that will be heard in the Crystal/McArthur radio version. Choosing the right Australian property owner and his family for the camera, for example, is not a simple logistical operation!

I think that all of us on the production team have had an experience of the diversity of English denied many scholars. In particular, our sound tapes constitute something of an archive of the language in the 1980s, although even as I write there will be details of usage that are already out of date.

The back page of *London Calling* contains details of English by Radio programmes. If you haven’t listened, you might not realise that besides programmes for learners (such as the humorous Sony Radio Awards-nominated *Professor Grammar*) there are programmes for teachers – the Sunday magazine programme *Speaking of English* looks at all aspects of language learning and teaching – and for anybody with a general interest in the language.

One recent English by Radio series now being broadcast in 18 parts on World Service is *The Story of English*. David Crystal, professor of linguistics, author and broadcaster, is joined by Tom McArthur, editor of the magazine *English Today*, and of the Oxford Companion to the English Language, to present the programmes.

The series, produced by Hamish Norbrook, is based on the original television series but with the overseas listener in mind. Here Robert McCrum (right), co-author of the TV series and writer of the book that accompanies it, explains how the whole project began...



The Story of English itself follows a more or less chronological narrative, from the Anglo-Saxons to the present. My own flip shorthand for the series has sometimes been *From Jutes to Jargon*.

In the course of a journey both in time and space, we explore the main varieties of English in the United Kingdom (Scots, Geordie, Scouse, Midlands, Cockney, Home Counties, West Country), in North America (New England, Midland, Southern, General American and Canadian), and indeed throughout the world, in the Caribbean, West Africa, Australia, New Zealand, India and Singapore.

Although I was always convinced that our story was about English as a global phenomenon, I don’t think any of us involved in the series anticipated

quite how great is the diversity, to come back to Walt Whitman’s observation, that provides continuous enrichment, and places the language on the path of continuous and inexorable evolution. That’s not, of course, to say that some great English writers haven’t argued against our changing language.

The most famous advocate of “Correct English” was Dr Jonathan Swift, the gloomy dean, author of *Gulliver’s Travels*. In a celebrated essay, he attacked a number of 18th century buzz words. The objects of his fury – “mob”, “sham”, “banter”, “bubble”, and “bully” – now seem curiously harmless.

Later English writers have taken a more commonsense line towards the influence of the street. So in *Middlemarch* we find George Eliot writing: “Correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays. And the strongest slang of all is the slang of poets.”

ONE of the richest sources of vital new slang has been – and still is – the United States. The pioneers of the Wild West were the fur trappers in the Rockies, the riverboat men on the Mississippi, the Forty-niners in California, the railroad workers on the Union-Pacific, the cowboys on the Chisholm trail. An astonishing amount of the English we use today can be traced directly to their experiences.

From the fur traders we get “work like a beaver” and, because they used buck skins as currency, a *buck* for “a dollar”. On the Mississippi, slaves might be “sold down the river” (where the plantation owners were said to be harsher).

A riverboat gambler might “call your bluff”, “throw in his hand”, “cash in his chips”, or even “pass the buck” – here the “buck” was a buckhorn-handled knife placed in front of the dealer and passed by a player who did not fancy being in the hot seat – a later piece of gangster slang for the electric chair.

Once the goldrush started in 1849, Easterners hurried out west – “to stake a claim”. They were looking for a “bonanza” (a Spanish word meaning “fair weather”). In California, they would hope that things would “pan out”, so that they might “hit pay dirt” and “strike it rich”.

Some of the slang used by the railroad workers – “step on board” or “take your berth” – was simply borrowed from existing nautical jargon. But much of it was new. On its journey, a train might be “in the clear”. Going uphill, it would “make the grade” (if it wasn’t “sidetracked”), and finally it would “reach the end of the line” – assuming it didn’t “go off the rails”. The Iron Horse gave us that quintessential Americanism: “to railroad” (meaning “to coerce”).

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QUALLY dramatic, perhaps, has been the influence of what used to be called "Broken English" on the language. It's well-established that phrases such as "nitty-gritty" and "jam session" come via pidgin English from the languages of West Africa. Perhaps less well-known is the way in which some of our most trendy, casual talk comes from the jazz parlours and jivetalk of Harlem in the 1920s.

One of the high priests of "jive talk" was Cab Calloway, who actually composed a song entitled *Mr Hepster's Jive Talk Dictionary*:

What's a hepcat? A hepcat is a guy

Who knows all the answers and I'm telling you why...

He's a high-falutin' student

Of the Calloway vocab.

From "hepcat", we get "hip", meaning "sophisticated" - or "cool" (another Black English expression). In 1938 Cab Calloway published a list of "hip" words which included some widely adopted by the Swinging '60s: "beat" (exhausted), "chick" (girl), "groovy" (fine), "hype" (persuasive talk), "jam" (improvised swing music), "riff" (musical phrase), "square" (an unhip person) - and "too much" (a term of highest praise).

As *The Story of English* will show, there are countless examples of the way in which the language of the street slowly passes into the mainstream - from all over the world. The Australianism "walkabout" comes from the Aborigines. The computer industry has created "interface", "software" and a staggering 700 new computer terms. Space exploration has given us "countdown" and "blast-off".

The Story of English shows that it's to the eclectic energy of the language that its writers have, traditionally, always responded. And it's to this energy that English - the world's first truly global language - owes its popularity and its survival.

● **Weds from 9th 1715 rep Thurs 0145, 0945**